

Christian Coff: The Taste for Ethics: An Ethic of Food Consumption

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This book makes the case for an ethical understanding of food consumption. Christian Coff notes that a growing number of consumers are making ethics a central part of their food consumption choices. Although incorporating morals and values into the increasingly industrialized food sector is admittedly difficult, this book attempts to lay out a blueprint for more transparency as food travels from the site of production to the consumers' table. Through a thorough history of ethics and food, Coff is able to show how we have arrived at the current state of the agro-food sector. From the early plant and animal classification schemes of Aristotle, to the advent of the biological sciences, the transformation to a market economy, the influence of positivism and finally technical advances in production and distribution, food has become commodified and homogenized to the point where consumers know little, if anything, about the production history and conversely the producers lack meaningful knowledge of consumers. This book attempts to show the reader how morals and ethics can be inserted into the current agricultural and food sector to create a more humane, fair, and transparent system.

First and foremost, Coff identifies the lack of production history as the main barrier to the development of food ethics. Over the last several hundred years, the links between producers and consumers have been severed. Utilizing the use of narrative, the author recommends that politically minded consumers reconstruct the links between food production and consumption. This is not an easy task and requires consumers to do much of the work on their own, but it is necessary for significant increases in values-based food consumption to be realized. Coff argues that "consumers with a taste for ethics want to know about the food production history," and to make this more commonplace, the food itself can be used as a "trace." Building off of semiotics and narrative ethics, the concept of the trace can

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be utilized to understand the production practices and eating habits of the past. Once food is reconceptualized as a “trace,” consumers are then reminded that there is indeed a production history, even though the industrialization of agriculture has erased much of it. This is an interesting approach, as the majority of consumers never think about who produced their food and under what conditions the production took place. Therefore, if consumers are able to inquire and gather information about the production history through the “trace” process, then food ethics has a real chance to become more widespread.

The reconstruction of production histories of food through the devices of narrative and trace are novel, yet it would seem that only a handful of truly politically engaged consumers would consider using them in their daily lives. This problem is emblematic of much of the argument in this book. While the arguments are rigorously historically documented and theoretically sound, the practicality of implementation appears to be quite low. This is not the fault of the author, but demonstrates the enormity of the task at hand; namely attempting to create an ethical and moral food system. However, this is how change begins, a theoretical blueprint has been created by Coff and now it is the task of producers, retailers, and consumers to take action. If the aforementioned groups are able to start reconstructing production histories, then we can begin to see what could or needs to be done differently and ethical food practices can become a reality.

As has been noted, much of this book is theoretical in nature; however, the last chapter introduces some concrete instructions on how to approach food from an ethical perspective. In addition, results of empirical studies on ethical traceability are reported that help ground the theoretical and historical arguments made earlier in the book. I appreciated this last chapter a great deal as it brings the argument down from an abstract level to a more grounded discussion on how consumers themselves see the issue of food consumption ethics. As one would expect, many consumers have a difficult time understanding the concept of food ethics and this point really drives home one of the major issues with this book and the topic in general: is the concept of food ethics really possible? This appears to be an unanswerable question at present; however, Coff’s arguments and analyses are very intriguing and convincing. I would recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in understanding the difficult and complex nature of creating an ethical and values-based food system.